DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 358 700 FL 021 234

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TITLE The Contributions of Joseph Sargent Hall to Appalachian Studies.
PUB DATE [92]
NOTE 16p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Area Studies; Bibliographies; *Folk Culture; *Historiography; *North American Culture; North American English; *Oral History; *Oral Language; Regional Characteristics; Regional Dialects; Researchers
IDENTIFIERS *Appalachian Studies; *Hall (Joseph Sargent)

ABSTRACT

The work of Joseph Sargent Hall, a pioneer researcher in Appalachian studies, is chronicled. Hall was hired by the National Park Service in 1937, as a graduate student, to document the lives and lore of older mountain residents allowed to remain in the Great Smoky Mountains after the land was purchased for a national park. His early efforts included extensive notes on and recordings of mountain natives speaking and singing. These represented the first systematic gathering of data on Appalachian speech. His doctoral dissertation was on the phonetics of Smoky Mountain English, and three books resulted from his recordings. Hall later returned to make a permanent record of mountain life, through oral histories, for the Park Service. He was one of the first linguistic fieldworkers to identify and challenge the "observer's paradox," that the natural, relaxed speech preferred for research is the most difficult to gather. After retiring from teaching, Hall wrote an extensive dictionary of Smoky Mountain speech based on his own collections, to be published in 1994 or 1995. Excerpts from the researcher's notes are included, and a bibliography of his published and unpublished work is appended. (MSE)

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The Contributions of Joseph Sargent Hall to Appalachian Studies

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On February 14, 1992, the field of Appalachian studies lost one of its greatest collectors and students with the passing of Joseph Sargent Hall in Oceanside, California, at the age of 85. He was a native of Montana and spent nearly his entire career teaching in California, he never presented a paper at a professional conference on his main interest, Appalachian speech, and he never attended an Appalachian Studies Association meeting, but Joseph Hall amassed one of the largest and most distinctive collections of Appalachian materials in existence. This paper will describe these and summarize the contributions made to the field of Appalachian studies by this important, but little-known scholar.

Joseph Hall was the pioneer researcher of the speech and culture of the Great Smoky Mountains of Tennessee and North Carolina. He was, in effect, the Alan Lomax of the Great Smokies. Through a chance opportunity in 1937, as a graduate student in Linguistics at Columbia University in New York, he was hired by the National Park Service to document the lives and lore of older mountain residents being allowed to remain in the Great Smoky Mountains after the government had purchased their land for the national park. After arriving in the Smokies in June of that year, Hall, an avid outdoorsman, quickly found himself at home with the people and their mountains, filled four notebooks with

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observations in that first summer of work. Then he recorded dozens of natives of the mountains speaking and singing and took ten further volumes of notes during in a seven-month stint in 1939-40, when under the auspices of the park service and the Civilian Conservation Corps he sought speakers throughout the mountains--in Greenbrier Cove, Cades Cove, Cosby, Emerts Cove, Sugarlands, Cataloochee, Smokemont, Hazel Creek, and other smaller, more remote communities. Hall continued gathering data on mountain speech and lore on periodic summer visits through 1972.

His doctoral dissertation on the phonetics of Smoky Mountain English was based on his early collecting. Published as a monograph by the American Dialect Society in 1942, it remains a half-century later the fullest study of the pronunciation of a variety of Appalachian speech. From Hall's recordings came stories of bear hunting and anecdotes of mountain life, many of which were printed in three paperback books that he published himself to help finance his research. The first of these, *Smoky Mountain Folks and Their Lore* (1960), is a collection of stories, character sketches, and landscape descriptions woven together by Hall's own account of his fieldwork. *Sayings from Old Smoky* (1972) was an extensive glossary of words, phrases, and proverbs excerpted from his recordings and notebooks. *Yarns and Tales from Old Smoky* (1978) is a collection of short narratives and anecdotes from his recordings. All three books featured photographs of mountain people and scenery. A complete

bibliography of Hall's work, published and unpublished, can be found at the end of this paper.

Hall's Smoky Mountain recordings and notebooks represent the first systematic gathering of data on Appalachian speech. In his early work (1939-41) he recorded on two machines, a Garwick that operated by cables hooked onto the truck battery, on which he made about 90 aluminum discs,[1] and an Allied that ran on a battery pack, on which he recorded about 70 acetate discs with speech and vocal and instrumental music, including traditional ballads, a few hymns, and many popular songs from the era. These early recordings, which alone constitute one of the most important collections of Southern mountain material (several of Hall's speakers were born in the mid-nineteenth century, at least two of them in the 1840s), were supplemented by forty reel-to-reel tapes on which stories, dances, and other material were recorded from 1953 to 1972.

Joseph Hall, having become entranced with the Smokies by his early field work there, returned for period summer visits for three decades to enjoy the mountains, renew friendships, and continue his research. Asked by the Park Service to make a permanent record of mountain life by recording the recollections of a people and culture being displaced and dispersed, Hall became something of a missionary and antiquarian himself; from time to time romanticism did touch his writing, even his dissertation (in which he idealized mountain people for their self-reliance and other qualities), but he did not lose scholarly

perspective. Hall early discounted, for instance, the myth of the Elizabethan origin of mountain speech: "Great Smokies speech is not Elizabethan English transplanted to America" (1941:12).

The following is an extended excerpt from an unpublished first-person account written by Joseph Hall describing his field work:

> In my collecting from 1937 to 1941 I stayed at the CCC camps which provided good food and lodging and were sources of information as to the people roundabout to interview and record. Each camp had a superintendent in charge of the work of the CCC boys, an NPS ranger, and a fireguard. Each of them knew the other residents of the district. Most of these personnel were formerly logging industry employees who knew their terrain well and the most likely informants. They usually had some unusual character in mind for me like Zilphie Sutton of Walnut Bottoms, Mrs. Clem Enloe of Tight Run Branch, and Jake Welch of Hazel Creek, beside all the other local folk. At each camp I would walk or hike to the homes of people or ride on a CCC truck going in that direction. Later the NPS gave me a pickup truck for this purpose and to carry the recording equipment . . .
>
> They also assigned a CCC enrollee to help with the driving, the equipment, and at times take part in the

interview. As to lodging, I also lived for two or three weeks at the homes of several residents, like the Shultses of Emerts Cove, the Ramseys of Cosby, and the Leatherwood and Messer family at the White Oak (near Cataloochee). These good-hearted people were of course of enormous assistance as to the speech of the area and suggested important things to talk about.

In addition to the interviews and passing the time of day in chance meetings with people there were my constant associations with friends I made along the way. . . . I lived in their homes, went to church with them (mostly Baptist, with one Primitive Baptist service). I worked in the fields at haying time, helped "wrap" tobacco, gathered and chopped wood for kitchen stoves, went hunting and fishing (with the Messer and Williams families of White Oak), attended special events like the Hall family reunion at Halls Top, North Carolina, enjoyed the festive fare amid formidable quantities of food, whole hams, pots of roastin' ears, watermelons on ice in tubs, and so on. I attended a funeral of a close family kin, attended farm bureau classes such as at Newport, Tennessee, where class members kidded my friend Wilford Metcalf about living on "Tobacco Road," attended large reunions where whole communities had been displaced by the Park, always with dinner on the ground with loads of tempting food and

with wonderful friends and kin to talk to.

From my first days in the Smokies I listened carefully to all native people I met and noted down expressions that they used. [D]uring my first summer in the Smokies in 1937 I filled four secretarial notebooks with jottings from daily speech and notes from interviews. When I returned to the area in 1939 with Columbia's blessing and an appointment as Collaborator, I proceeded to fill more and larger notebooks, and these plus those I made until 1972 as a private citizen gave me about 1500 pages of material.

Second to the notebooks were the phonographic recordings. . . . The topics of the recordings were anything the informant wished to talk about. Men talked about their farm, their crops, their cattle, and hunting. Women liked to tell recipes or talk about their interest in weaving and quilting and the like. Sometimes a CCC foreman or ranger would suggest something like "Have Grady tell you how he trapped a groundhog in the Park nursery, how he had to trap twelve to catch the particular one that was eating the plants." There was general fun at such an incident. Or have Mrs. Enloe tell about her fishing rights. When I met her at her house on Tight Run Branch, North Carolina, she asked, "Are you a little Park man or a big Park man?" Without an answer from me, she said,

"Big Park man or little Park man, you son of a bitch, I fish when I please, winter or summer. See that can of worms?" (They were then verboten in the park.) She showered me with praise when I gave her a peace offering, a box of snuff, and let me take her picture (it has appeared in several books). She then told how her brother fought in the war (the Civil War): "He was on the Rebel side and I'm a Rebel yit!" I could usually get a rise out of people if I asked them how they liked the national park. Usual answers were like "It's the worst thing that ever ruint this country." One man of Hartford, Tennessee, said, "Before the park come in, I could shoot a rabbit or a possum whenever I wanted to. Now I don't stand no more show than a one-legged man at an ass-kicking!" But lest anyone assume that these crudities were typical, let me assure you that most people were polite and cooperative and could see that the recordings were made for study and preservation as a historical record of aspects of Smokies life. A few speakers declined the microphone, not wishing "to be made light of." They were sensitive to furriners coming in to make fun of them. . . .

From the last of this passage, we see that Joseph Hall was one of the first linguistic fieldworkers to identify and challenge what has become known to modern researchers as "the

observer's paradox"--that a researcher most wants to record relaxed, natural speech, but this is the most difficult kind to gather when the speaker is being "observed," i.e., tape-recorded. His first published report on his field work reports his strategy for overcoming the self-consciousness and reservations of his speakers:

> . . . if the speakers realized that their speech was being constantly observed, the utterance would have lost in spontaneity. Hence it was necessary to make them forget themselves as much as possible, and this was found practicable in the majority of cases by putting the informants in the track of their favorite subjects or stor[i]es. With men the talk centered mainly around 'old-timey stuff', such as hunting, making liquor before the Park era, misfortunes, tragedies and court trials now generally forgotten; with women the most productive topics were activities connected with the home, their favorite remedies for illnesses, weaving, cooking, and the conditions of living in their younger days. (Hall 1940, 1-2)

Even so, Hall's experiences ultimately persuaded him that his speakers rarely guarded their speech: "most of them were very independent people and didn't care what people thought about their speech" (Montgomery 1990). His beguilingly simple

methodology, merely to let his speakers talk on whatever topic they had considerable expertise or interest, was his own. It had the great virtue of eliciting lengthy passages of relatively uninhibited speech; many of the bear-hunting accounts, for example, were monologues ten to fifteen minutes in length. Because he was a keen listener and a sensitive (albeit self-trained) field worker and used this approach of asking broad, open-ended questions, the responses he recorded were often fast-paced, uninterrupted narratives, of extreme value to modern-day linguists seeking stretches of natural speech to study discourse structure, undertake quantitative analysis of grammar or pronunciation, or for other purposes. Hall edited many of these passages for his 1960 and 1978 books.

Hall was a cautious, well-trained scholar; in his 1942 dissertation his phonetic work was detailed and his historical investigations scrupulous, reflecting his training from Columbia and a traditional research paradigm that was primarily interested in identifying and tracing relics of older speech patterns in relatively isolated communities such as those in the Southern mountains. Scholarly currents and competition were, however, very soon to overtake him. The Linguistic Atlas of New England was being published in the early 1940s and the atlas approach was quickly becoming the dominant, "progressive" way to conduct research on American dialects. Shortly after its publication, Hall's dissertation was reviewed (McDavid 1943) quite negatively in the leading linguistic journal of the day, Language, by a

young disciple in the linguistic atlas movement at Yale who found fault with its lack of a standard interview format and other aspects of its methodology. There can also be little doubt that a spirited rivalry between the linguistic camps at Columbia and Yale was at play in the critique of Hall's work.

An exceedingly modest man, Hall was profoundly discountenanced by the experience. He concluded that his research was outmoded by linguistic standards, and he never sought publication in a linguistic outlet again. However, there was no dampening his enthusiasm for documenting mountain life. With his affinity for Smokies culture undiminished, he shifted his scholarly sights in the 1950s and 1960s from speech to folklore, recording Smoky Mountain natives playing traditional music, discussing witchlore, folk medicine, and party games, and telling folk tales and superstitions. He published excerpts of this material in folklore journals and in his three aforementioned books, but because he had little contact with other scholars working on Appalachian English and folklore, his work still was largely unknown. This writer has yet to find anyone other than older staff members of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park who met him.

After his retirement from teaching in 1972, Joseph Hall spent much of his final twenty years on his life's great work and a culminating expression of his devotion to the mountains and their people. This was an extensive glossary of Smokies speech based on his extensive private collections spanning over a third

of a century. It was the privilege of the present writer to correspond with Professor Hall over the last decade of his life and to inherit the project, which he is now supplementing with a variety of other sources and editing for a work to be published under the title, A Dictionary of Smoky Mountain English. When it appears in 1994 or 1995, the dictionary will represent the most comprehensive reference work available on Southern mountain speech.[2]

Hall never relinquished his belief that his collections would ultimately interest language historians, as well as folklorists and many other students of mountain life. He deposited a copy of his recordings and his unpublished manuscripts in the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress; many of his originals, along with some copies and much of his library, were passed on to this writer at Hall's death. In accordance with Hall's wishes that they find a permanent home close to the mountains he loved so heartily, I am pleased to announce that these materials (books, tapes, typescripts, and citation cards for the dictionary) are being donated to the Archives of Appalachia at East Tennessee State University and will form a special collection in his name at that repository. Joseph Hall's interviews with older Smokies residents a half-century ago and the rest of his collections are being made available in Tennessee to all interested scholars, and thanks to Hall we will shortly have a dictionary of the traditional speech of the Great Smoky Mountain region.

The field of Appalachian studies has known a handful of individuals whose work commands permanent recognition for their documenting the culture of the region. Among these Joseph Sargent Hall surely stands very tall.

APPENDIX: PUBLICATIONS OF JOSEPH SARGENT HALL

I. Published:

1940. "Folk-lore and Folk History in the Great Smoky Mountains." United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service.

1941. "Mountain Speech in the Great Smokies." *NPS Popular Study Series* no. 5. U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service.

1941. "Great Smokies Ballads and Songs from the Collection of Joseph S. Hall." *American Poet* 1 (September): 18-21.

1941. "Some Party Games of the Great Smoky Mountains." *Journal of American Folklore* 54: 68-71.

1942. *The Phonetics of Great Smoky Mountain Speech*. American Speech Reprints and Monographs no. 4. Morningside Heights, N.Y.: King's Crown Press.

1942. "Great Smokies Ballads." *American Poet* 1 (December): 22-23.

1957. "Bear Hunting Stories from the Great Smokies." *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin* 23: 67-74.

1958. "Horace M. Hall's Letters from Gillespie County, Texas, 1871-1873. *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 62: 336-53.

1960. *Smoky Mountain Folks and Their Lore*. Gatlinburg, Tenn: Great Smoky Mountains Natural History Association.

1972. *Sayings from Old Smoky*. Asheville, NC: Cataloochee Press.

1978. *Yarns and Tales from the Great Smokies*. Asheville, NC: Cataloochee Press.

In progress. *The Dictionary of Smoky Mountain English*. (with Michael Montgomery).

In progress. *The Grammar of Smoky Mountain English*. (with Michael Montgomery).

II. Unpublished:

n.d. Bear-hunting Stories from the Great Smokies. Typescript. c.100 pp.

n.d. Some Features of Smokies Syntax and Phraseology. Typescript. 37 pp.

n.d. Health and Illness in the Great Smokies. Typescript. 24 pp.

n.d. Hunting in the Smokies: The Hunters, the Language, Types of Hunting, Transcriptions. Typescript. c.150 pp.

Notes

1. It is unclear precisely how many discs Hall recorded; his own records reveal several different counts.

2. This volume will be prefaced by introductory sections on the history, pronunciation, grammar, and other aspects of Smoky Mountain speech. For a prospectus of the dictionary, see Montgomery and Hall (1991).

Works Cited

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